

GUEST EDITORIAL

SOCIAL WORKERS UNITE AGAINST XENOPHOBIA: PURSUING SOCIAL WORK'S POLITICAL MANDATE

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Social work practitioners and social work educators took a strong stance against xenophobia by submitting the following statement to the Minister of Social Development Dr Zola Skweyiya.

We are a group of social work educators and social work practitioners representing the following groups: The Association of Schools of Social Work in Africa (ASSWA); African Federation of Social Workers; the Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions (ASASWEI); the National Association of Social Workers, South Africa (NASW, SA) and the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP). We wish to express our outrage at the senseless killing of people in a country where we profess to uphold the dignity of all human beings. We understand that the dynamics and the socio-economic, cultural and political conditions that serve as precursors to such de-humanising conduct are complex. While we understand this, the message that needs to go out to communities is that nothing at all can condone any attack on fellow human beings. We urge all those working in the human services sector and the Government of South Africa to send out a message of zero tolerance for violence. We must actively send out calls for peace and work toward peaceful resolution of conflict and of differences.

We wish to go further than merely condemn the current attacks and the failures to deal with the crises that we have on hand. We want to offer the social work skills that exist in the country to help deal with the situation. We propose that the National Department of Social Development and the Department of Home Affairs collaborate with the above mentioned groups to form crisis teams that we train to engage in community based crisis intervention and trauma de-briefing on an immediate level. The longer term objective is to implement programmes to prevent xenophobia and violence. We would also have to ensure that we create spaces for dialogue around all forms of exclusions and oppressions in our day to day lives on a sustained basis – this must of necessity include issues regarding xenophobia and how it interacts with other social criteria like “race”, ethnicity, gender, disability and sexual orientation to render some groups of people marginalized and vulnerable to abuse.

The international community looks to South Africa for solutions and we represent a beacon of hope on the African continent. As South Africans we need to take up the challenges that confront us in far more direct and decided ways than we currently do and as social workers we are offering our skills to be part of the solution to the enormous problems that we are confronted with. We commend those social workers who are already engaged and we urge all those who are not to make themselves available to deal with the current humanitarian crisis that we face.

In an uncharacteristically swift response, a day after our submission of the statement, the Minister responded as follows: “Given the importance of this matter, I would like to thank you for the assistance that you are offering especially during this crisis. I would like to have a meeting with you and all the organisations that are involved as soon as possible ...”. This meeting took place in Pretoria on 2 June 2008 with representatives of all the groups, except IFSW, Africa that could not make it on short notice.

The response from the Minister during the meeting was very positive – he was on one accord with us about the current crises, but more importantly he voiced a strong need for us to use the

concerns around the current crisis to serve as a catalyst to deal with the deeper problems confronting South Africa. He labelled poverty a “social crisis” of enormous proportion and said that he hoped we would work together to develop plans of actions. Minister Skweyiya requested that a proposal be put together to be submitted to the Ministry, which we have done.

The support received from colleagues within and across Africa, particularly from the International Federation of Social Workers and the Association of Schools of Social Work in Africa has been phenomenal, reflecting that social work practitioners and educators are interested in pursuing the political aspects of social work. Nigel Hall sent the following message on the COSW distribution list.

The quick response from the social work community has also been warmly applauded by social work educators and practitioners from across the continent. The IFSW Africa President and COSW Board Member Charles Mbugua as sent a message to the South African consortium as follows: “Bravo!!! This is a major step forward in that our concern in this crisis has been noted at such a high level and secondly, our contribution to the solution of the problem is valued and ‘we have a space’. Rarely, few governments embrace with both hands what we as social workers say or offer, and this is on of those few occasions.”

As social workers we must be concerned about challenge and address those macro level socio-economic factors that render some groups of people privileged and other groups of people marginalized, excluded and oppressed. Xenophobia is, undoubtedly, symptomatic of a society in crises, with South Africa characterised by high rates of unemployment, poverty, food insecurity, inequality and preventable diseases, including nutritional disorders, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. As social workers we must listen and respond to these crises if we are going to play a part in preventing the kind of genocidal madness that ravaged Rwanda in 1994. Socio-economic differences, rather than ethnicity per se, are what Diamond (2005) stresses as a factor in genocide, with excessive inequality between the haves and have-nots, clearly contributing to conflict. Jared Diamond (2005:328) frames it starkly but most poignantly in relation to the genocide in Rwanda:

All these people who were about to be killed had land and at times cows. And somebody had to get these lands and those cows after the owners were dead. In a poor and increasingly overpopulated country this was not a negligible incentive ... The people whose children had to walk barefoot to school killed the people who could buy shoes for theirs.

REFERENCES

DIAMOND, J. 2005. **Collapse: how societies choose to fail or survive.** London: Penguin Books.

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